

Morality in Cyberspace: A comparison of Chinese and U.S. youth's beliefs about acceptable online behavior

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Abstract

This cross-cultural comparison of approximately 600 youth in China and 600 youth in the U.S. focused on the moral values, acceptability of a variety of morally questionable online behaviors, and the relationship between moral values and acceptability of online behaviors. Findings indicated differences both in moral values and in behaviors that Chinese and U.S. youth believed were acceptable in the virtual world. Chinese youth found more behaviors acceptable than did U.S. youth, with the exception of videogame violence, which U.S. youth found more acceptable. The value placed on peer approval predicted the acceptability of morally questionable online behaviors, suggesting that a peer culture supporting such behaviors may account for their acceptability among Chinese youth. Educational interventions designed to reduce morally questionable online behaviors by taking cultural values into account are discussed, as is the need for additional research to establish a link between beliefs about acceptability and actual online behaviors.

1. Introduction

Children around the world are socialized into the moral value system of their culture, a socialization that helps them to do what is "right" and avoid doing what is "wrong" [1]. To some extent there are cultural invariants in moral value systems that promote the development of a coherent and universal set of morally acceptable behaviors. Moreover, within cultures there are absolutist [2-4] and utilitarian perspectives [5-7] which dictate that some behaviors are never acceptable (absolutist) whereas other behaviors are acceptable in some situations but not others (utilitarian). Thus, for example, although both Eastern and Western cultures

value honesty and discourage dishonesty, Eastern cultures are more tolerant of dishonesty that helps the group whereas Western cultures are more tolerant of dishonesty that helps the individual [7-9, 11, 15, 16].

Despite cultural invariants in moral values systems there are also cultural differences. Most theorizing and research on this topic has focused on differences between Eastern cultures, such as China, and Western cultures, such as the U.S.. Theoretically, different cultures provide different sanctions for children's moral conceptions and behavior depending on what is most *valued* in that culture [8-10]. Eastern cultures value the group over the individual, and self-effacement and modesty over self-promotion and pride [11-12]. These values are presumably rooted in historical, political, and religious foundations in Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism [13]. In contrast, Western cultures value the individual over the group, and self-promotion and pride over self-effacement and modesty [14]. These values are presumably rooted in the "rugged individualism" and freedom of choice that provide the foundations of Western cultures [8, 9, 11, 14].

The most popular theory of children's moral development is Kohlberg's cognitive-developmental theory [17]. According to Kohlberg, moral development is primarily a matter of developing ever more sophisticated cognitive structures - structures that are more complex, differentiated, integrated, logical, organized and based on superior perspective-taking skills. Advanced moral reasoning presumably gives rise to more prescriptive, universal, and impartial moral decisions. With respect to moral reasoning and moral behavior, the assumption is that the more mature one's understanding of why a moral choice is correct (i.e., the more sophisticated the cognitive structure), the greater the probability that an individual will behave accordingly [18].

Research testing Kohlberg's theory suggests cross-cultural universality in the developmental sequence and cognitive structures involved in moral reasoning [19-20]. However, much of this research has been plagued by methodological criticisms focused on the subjectivity and unreliability of the choice dilemma paradigm used to test the theory [21]. Other criticisms include a Western male bias in determining what is "higher" moral reasoning, a strong dependence on cognitive ability to achieve higher moral reasoning, and a failure to link moral reasoning to actual behavior [22].

Research has yet to consider the issue of morality in the virtual world. This neglect is surprising in light of evidence that youth, especially in Western, affluent nations, spend a significant portion of their daily lives online [23] where opportunities to engage in morally "questionable" behaviors abound. The anonymity of the Internet, its 24/7 availability, and the plethora of "inappropriate" information and activities available online clearly raise moral concerns for youth. For example, it has already been well documented that youth view pornography online (cyberporn), download files illegally, bully friends and acquaintances (cyberbullying), interact in "intimate" ways with strangers, and "steal" information online to represent it as their own (plagiarism) [24].

Perhaps the closest approximation to a consideration of moral behavior online is the "acceptable use" policy. Internet service providers (ISPs) and public and private institutions that provide Internet access (e.g., schools) typically require that users sign a statement agreeing to refrain from unacceptable online behaviors. Whether refraining from unacceptable behaviors online is viewed as a moral imperative is unclear. Similarly uncertain is whether morality developed in the "real" world influences beliefs about what constitutes immoral or unacceptable behaviors in the virtual world and whether culture influences these beliefs.

The present research provides the first systematic investigation of morality in the virtual world among youth from different cultures. Approximately 600 Chinese youth and 600 U.S. youth completed surveys assessing their moral values and the acceptability of a diverse set of morally questionable online behaviors. This report focuses on three questions. First, are there cultural differences in moral values? Second, are there cultural differences in the acceptability of morally questionable online behaviors? Third, do moral values developed in the real world predict the acceptability of morally questionable behaviors in the virtual world?

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedures

Chinese youth were recruited from four public schools in the Wuhua School District, Kunming, China. Kunming is the capital of Yunnan Province in southwestern China and has a population of over 4 million. The Wuhua School district includes both urban and rural schools that are similar in terms of student and teacher characteristics and resources. Half the participants came from rural schools and half from urban schools. Of the 602 participants, 52% were girls. Average age was 12.16 years old, with age ranging from 10 to 15 years old. Most participants were Han (66%), the majority ethnic group in China. The second largest group was Bai (29%), with the remaining participants distributed among 11 other ethnic groups (e.g., Yi, Miao).

Surveys were administered in the classroom in the presence of both a researcher and the homeroom teacher. Students required approximately 30 minutes to complete the surveys.

U.S. youth were recruited from 20 middle schools geographically distributed throughout the southern lower peninsula of Michigan. An additional 100 youth were recruited from an after-school center in Detroit, Michigan. Rural, suburban and urban youth were represented in the sample, with more urban and suburban than rural youth. Of the 604 participants, 54% were girls. Average age was 12.10 years old, with age ranging from 11 to 16 years old. Racial/ethnic group membership was as follows: 57% White Caucasian; 29% African American; 5% Hispanic American; 2% Native American; 1% Asian American; 6% Other.

Surveys were distributed by mail to children participating in the Children and Technology Project, a 3-year longitudinal study of the impact of technology use on cognitive, social, psychological and moral development. The project is funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation (www.msu.edu/user/jacks067/CT/children/index.htm).

2.2. Materials

The Youth Survey was developed for the U.S. sample based on questions from 3 sources: Josephson Institute Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth, 2002, 2004 [25]; Prosocial Moral Reasoning Scale [26] and the HomeNetToo Project [27]. To assess more values participants rated 15 statements in terms of their importance to them personally (e.g., being good looking; 1=not important, 2=important, 3=very

important; see Table 1). To assess the acceptability of morally questionable online behaviors participants rated 34 behaviors (e.g., Read another person's email without asking; 1=never or almost never OK, 2=sometimes or usually OK, 3=always or almost always OK; see Table 2). The moral values and behaviors are provided verbatim in the Results section.

The Youth Survey was translated into Chinese by a bilingual graduate student. Both the Chinese translation and the English version were then checked by three bilingual speakers, one educational psychologist in the U.S. and two psychologists in the provincial educational research institute in China. Inconsistencies were discussed and resulted in a few minor changes in the Chinese wording. Two questions about religion were deleted because it was considered unlikely that Chinese children would have a concept of religion and because it would be more difficult to obtain permission for the survey if questions about religion were included.

3. Results

The mean moral value ratings of Chinese and U.S. youth are presented in Table 1. Chinese youth were more likely than U.S. youth to value: (1) being popular; (2) having a good moral character; (3) being thought of as honorable; (4) helping others; (5) being famous; and (6) being charitable to others. U.S. youth were more likely than Chinese youth to value: (1) being good-looking; (2) being wealthy; (3) being treated with respect; and (4) getting into college.

Table 2 presents mean ratings of the acceptability of a morally questionable online behaviors by youth in China and the U.S.. Chinese youth found it more acceptable than did U.S. youth to: (1) read another person's email without asking; (2) use a friend's Internet account without asking; (3) send an email that contains sexually explicit language to someone you know; (4) send an email that contains sexually explicit language to a stranger; (5) use sexually explicit language in a chat room; (6) send an email that contains violent, threatening language to someone you know; (7) send an email that contains violent, threatening language to a stranger; (8) use violent, threatening language in a chat room; (9) delete files or other information that belongs to someone else without asking; (10) look at pornographic, obscene, or sexually explicit material online; (11) download and save pornographic, obscene, or sexually explicit material; (12) hack into a government web site without permission; (13) intentionally spread a computer virus; (14) email strangers with the answers to a test they have to take; (15) text message (using a cell phone)

your friends with answers to a test they are taking; (16) text message (using a cell phone) other students with answers to a test they are taking; (17) email strangers; (18) meet (in real life) someone you met on the Internet.

U.S. youth found it more acceptable than did Chinese youth to: (1) text message (using a cell phone) your friends during class; (2) pretend to be someone else in a chat room; (3) play videogames that contain violence against characters who are not people; (4) play videogames that contain violence against other people; (5) play videogames that contain destruction of property; (6) play videogames that contain sexual violence. However, it is important to note that the mean acceptability rating for all items for all youth was around 1, indicating that youth found these behaviors never or almost never acceptable.

Hierarchical regression analyses were used to determine whether moral values developed in the real world predicted the acceptability of morally questionable behaviors in the virtual world. To simplify and clarify factor analyses (principal components, varimax rotation) were performed to reduce the number of moral values and morally questionable online behaviors to include in the regression analyses. Two moral values factors and five morally questionable online behaviors factors were identified that had similar factor structures for Chinese and U.S. youth and resulted in reliable composites.

The two moral values factors were labeled Moral character (6 items; $\alpha=.71$, e.g., Being thought of as honorable.) and Peer approval (4 items, $\alpha=.69$, e.g., Being good looking.). The 5 morally questionable online behaviors factors were labeled Intentional harm (13 items, $\alpha=.95$, e.g., Send an email that contains violent, threatening language to someone you know), Virtual-to-real world harm (8 items, $\alpha=.92$, e.g., Email strangers with the answers to a test they have to take), Invasion of privacy (6 items, $\alpha=.86$, e.g., Read another person's emails without asking), Videogame violence (4 items, $\alpha=.88$; e.g., Play videogames that contain violence against other people) and Connecting with strangers (3 items, $\alpha=.72$, e.g., Talk to strangers in a chat room).

Cultural differences on the 7 composite measures are summarized in Table 3. Chinese youth valued moral character and peer approval more than did U.S. youth. Chinese youth found it more acceptable than did U.S. youth to engage in intentional harm online and to connect with strangers online. U.S. youth found it more acceptable than did Chinese youth to participate in videogame violence.

Separate hierarchical regression analyses were used to predict each of the five morally questionable online

behavior composites from the two moral value composites. Culture was controlled in those analyses in which morally questionable online behavior was influenced by culture (i.e., intentional harm, videogame violence, connecting with strangers). In addition, sex was controlled in the analysis in which sex differences were obtained on the composite behavior measure - Videogame violence ($F(1, 1040)=38.00, p<.001$). Males considered this behavior more acceptable than did females. Results of the hierarchical regression analyses are presented in Table 4.

The more youth valued peer approval, the more likely they were to engage in all of the morally questionable online behaviors. Thus youth you valued Peer approval more were more likely to: 1) engage in intentionally harmful behavior online; 2) engage in behavior online that had harmful consequences in the real world; 3) invade others' privacy online; 4) engage in videogame violence; 5) connect with strangers online. In addition, the more youth valued Moral character the less likely they were to engage in videogame violence or to connect with strangers online. Thus, moral values in the real world predicted beliefs about the acceptability of morally questionable behavior in the virtual world, even after controlling for the effects of culture and sex on these beliefs.

4. Discussion

Our results answer the three questions posed in the introduction. First, there are cultural differences in the moral values of Chinese and U.S. youth. Second, there are cultural differences in the acceptability of morally questionable online behaviors by Chinese and U.S. youth. Third, moral values developed in the real world predict the acceptability of moral questionable behaviors in the virtual world. These results have implications for educating youth about morality in the virtual world in ways that take into account cultural differences in morality in the real world.

In general, the moral values of Chinese youth were consistent with a cultural emphasis on the group over the individual. Chinese youth were more likely than U.S. youth to value characteristics that pertained to their peer group and how they were perceived by others. Thus, they valued being popular, being thought of as honorable, helping others, being famous and being charitable to others more than did U.S. youth. U.S. youth valued characteristics consistent with Western cultural values. Thus, they valued being good-looking, being wealthy and being treated with respect more than did Chinese youth. They also valued getting into college more than did Chinese youth.

However, it is not clear whether this difference reflects differences in the value of higher education or differences in access to it.

Chinese and U.S. youth varied dramatically in what was considered to be acceptable online behaviors. Chinese youth found it more acceptable than did U.S. youth to engage in intentionally harmful online behaviors (e.g., hack into a government web site without permission; intentionally spread a computer virus) and to connect with strangers online (email strangers; meet (in real life) someone you met online). There was also some evidence that Chinese youth found it more acceptable to invade other people's privacy online (e.g., read another person's email without asking; delete files or other information that belongs to someone else without asking), to engage in online behavior that would have harmful consequences offline (e.g., email strangers with the answers to a test they have to take) and to view and save pornographic, obscene, or sexually explicit material. Chinese youth were also more likely than U.S. youth to use cell phone text messaging to engage in behaviors that would have harmful consequences in the real world (e.g., text message (using a cell phone) your friends and other students with answers to a test they are taking). The only morally questionable behaviors that U.S. youth found more acceptable than did Chinese youth were engaging in videogame violence (e.g., play videogames that contain violence against other people, destruction of property, or sexual violence), text messaging (using a cell phone) friends during class, and pretending to be someone else in a chat room. However, it is important to note once again that all of these morally questionable behaviors were viewed, on average, as unacceptable by both Chinese and U.S. youth.

Youth's moral values predicted their beliefs about the acceptability of morally questionable online behaviors. The more youth valued peer approval the more likely they were to engage in all forms of morally questionable online behavior, that is, intentionally harmful online behavior, online behavior that would have harmful consequences offline, invading other people's privacy online, engaging in videogame violence and connecting with strangers online. In contrast, the more youth valued moral character the less likely they were to engage in videogame violence.

Our results suggest that Chinese youth's greater acceptance of morally questionable online behavior is mediated by the value they place on peer approval. It may be that peers encourage morally questionable online behavior in China, perhaps as a way of asserting autonomy in a culture less accepting of youthful autonomy than Western cultures. To test this possibility we conducted additional hierarchical regression analyses to determine whether country

effects remained significant after controlling for the value of peer approval. They did, albeit attenuated. We also examined whether the country effect on videogame violence remained significant after controlling for the value of moral character. It did, but again attenuated. Thus, although moral values developed in the real world predict beliefs about the acceptability of morally questionable behaviors in the virtual world, they cannot fully explain cultural differences in the acceptability of questionable behaviors.

Implications for the education of youth about appropriate online behavior follow from our findings. First, a lack of “moral character” does not appear to be the issue in understanding most inappropriate online behaviors. Instead, two other factors appear to be important: the extent to which moral character is rooted in peer approval and the extent to which peer group norms permit and/or encourage morally questionable online behaviors. Thus, the focus of educational interventions must be on changing group norms about what is acceptable online rather than building individual moral character. Second, moral character does appear to influence the acceptability of videogame violence. Even after controlling for county and sex effects, youth with higher moral character were less likely to engage in videogame violence than youth who scored lower on these measures. Thus, educational interventions must focus on developing an understanding in youth that aggression, even in play or fantasy, is morally unacceptable behavior.

Additional research is needed to link beliefs about the acceptability of morally questionable behavior to actual behavior. For example, do Chinese youth actually engage in more of the morally questionable online behaviors described in here than do U.S. youth? Given similar opportunities, do U.S. youth actually engage in more videogame violence than do Chinese youth? Still other research is needed to identify factors besides moral values that influence both beliefs about the acceptability of morally questionable online behaviors as well as actual online behaviors.

5. References

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Table 1: Moral values of Chinese and U.S. youth

	Chinese	U.S.	F-ratio
Being good looking	1.77	2.04	41.81
Being popular	2.23	1.67	180.18
Having a good moral character	2.67	2.50	24.68
Being wealthy/having a lot of money	1.51	1.67	14.32
Being thought of as honorable	2.49	2.37	11.39
Helping others	2.69	2.44	61.16
Having trusting friendships	2.70	2.70	ns
Treating others with respect	2.57	2.60	ns
Being treated with respect	2.21	2.71	191.73
Getting into college	2.51	2.75	45.55
Being famous	1.93	1.77	12.28
Pleasing my parents	2.55	2.51	ns
Being charitable/giving to others	2.63	2.31	90.04

Note. 1=not important to me, 2=important to me, 3=very important to me. “ns” means no significant difference between Chinese and U.S. youth. df(error) ranged from 1169 to 1181.

Table 2: Acceptability of morally questionable online behavior by Chinese and U.S. youth

	Chinese	U.S.	F-ratio
Read another person's email without asking.	1.13	1.09	3.89
Use a friend's Internet account without asking.	1.12	1.05	12.03
Keep track of another person's online activities.	1.10	1.09	ns
Pretend you are someone else in an email.	1.08	1.10	ns
Pretend you are someone else in a chat room.	1.09	1.16	9.38
Pretend you are someone else on a web page.	1.10	1.09	ns
Copy information from a Web page to your school report without changing it.	1.13	1.11	ns
Send an email that contains sexually explicit language to someone you know.	1.09	1.04	7.02
Send an email that contains violent, threatening language to someone you know.	1.10	1.04	9.79
Send an email that contains sexually explicit language to a stranger.	1.10	1.02	22.30
Send an email that contains violent, threatening language to a stranger.	1.09	1.02	16.23
Use sexually explicit language in a chat room.	1.09	1.03	14.82
Use violent, threatening language in a chat room.	1.11	1.04	16.28
Delete files or other information that belongs to someone else without asking.	1.12	1.06	7.59
Look at pornographic, obscene, or sexually explicit material on the web.	1.07	1.04	4.27
Download and save pornographic, obscene, or sexually explicit material.	1.08	1.02	14.21
Hack (get into so you can change) into a corporation's web site without permission.	1.08	1.04	ns
Hack (get into so you can change) into a government web site without permission.	1.07	1.02	11.19
Intentionally (on purpose) spread a computer virus.	1.07	1.02	11.15
Email your friend with the answers to a test he/she has to take.	1.07	1.06	ns
Use the answers emailed to you from a friend to do better on test you have to take.	1.07	1.05	ns
Email strangers with the answers to a test they have to take.	1.06	1.02	6.52
Use the answers emailed to you from a stranger to do better on test you have to take.	1.05	1.03	ns
Text message (using a cell phone) your friends during class.	1.06	1.11	6.29

Text message (using a cell phone) your friends with answers to a test they are taking.	1.08	1.02	10.43
Text message (using a cell phone) other students during class.	1.05	1.08	ns
Text message (using a cell phone) other students with answers to a test they are taking.	1.06	1.02	7.82
Talk to strangers in a chat room.	1.15	1.15	ns
Email strangers.	1.15	1.04	25.63
Meet (in real life) someone you met on the Internet.	1.14	1.06	17.61
Play videogames that contain violence against characters who are not people.	1.12	1.75	288.08
Play videogames that contain violence against other people.	1.12	1.61	186.40
Play videogames that contain destruction of property.	1.12	1.68	230.16
Play videogames that contain sexual violence.	1.10	1.19	12.02

Note. 1=Never or almost never, OK. 2=Sometimes or Usually OK, 3=Always or Almost always OK.
 "ns" means no significant difference between Chinese and U.S. youth. df(error) ranged from 1169 to 1181.

Table 3: Mean composite measures for Chinese and U.S. youth

	Chinese	U.S.	F-ratio
Value1: Moral character	2.60	2.45	40.97
Value 2: Peer approval	1.86	1.79	6.62
Behavior 1: Intentional harm	1.10	1.04	16.82
Behavior 2: Virtual-to-real world harm	1.07	1.05	ns
Behavior 3: Invasion of privacy	1.11	1.10	ns
Behavior 4: Videogame violence	1.12	1.56	229.64
Behavior 5: Connecting with strangers	1.15	1.10	7.37

Note. “ns” means no significant difference between Chinese and U.S. youth.

Table 4: Predicting morally questionable online behavior from moral values

Criterion and Summary Statistics	Predictor	Beta	t-value
Behavior 1: Intentional harm			
$F_{total} (1, 1108) = 16.68, p < .001$	Country	.13	4.13
$F_{change} (2, 1106) = 8.24, p < .001$	Value 1: Moral character	-.06	ns
	Value 2: Peer approval	.11	3.72
Behavior 2: Virtual-to-real world harm			
$F_{total} (2, 1090) = 8.96, p < .001$	Value 1: Moral character	-.01	ns
	Value 2: Peer approval	.13	4.23
Behavior 3: Invasion of privacy			
$F_{total} (2, 1112) = 8.50, p < .001$	Value 1: Moral character	-.04	ns
	Value 2: Peer approval	.12	4.00
Behavior 4: Videogame violence			
$F_{total} (2, 1053) = 142.66, p < .001$	Country	-.41	-14.92
$F_{change} (2, 1051) = 15.99, p < .001$	Sex	-.18	-6.38
	Value 1: Moral character	-.11	-3.88
	Value 2: Peer approval	.12	4.54
Behavior 5: Connecting with strangers			
$F_{total} (1, 1083) = 7.33, p < .01$	Country	.09	2.84
$F_{change} (2, 1081) = 6.87, p < .001$	Value 1: Moral character	-.07	-2.22
	Value 2: Peer approval	.10	3.19

Note. “ns” means no significant difference between Chinese and U.S. youth.